

TECHNOLOGY AND THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE

State and local governments play a key role in leveling the technology playing field for people of all ages. / By Nick Wreden

The future looked dark for one New York City seamstress four years ago. She was more than 65 years old, and her job had permanently disappeared. But this story has a happy ending: After completing a computer skills program offered by the city's Department for the Aging Senior Employment Services, she landed a job as an office assistant.

That is just one success story from the department, which trains 600 to 700 citizens 55 and older annually in its Age Works Computer Training Center. By going to class 20 hours a week up to 12 weeks, seniors learn the computer, Internet and customer service skills needed to

succeed in the business world. The award-winning program, which even includes a modest stipend to students during training, boasts a 70 percent or greater job placement rate.

COMPUTER KNOW-HOW
In Wisconsin, Christine Beatty leads Madison's computer literacy efforts for seniors.

"We want to retrain seniors and update their skills so they can succeed in the job market and become a valuable resource to potential employers," says Maria Serrano, director of the city's Department for the Aging. "Employers are enthusiastic about our efforts, because they recognize the loyalty, maturity and other assets that seniors can bring."

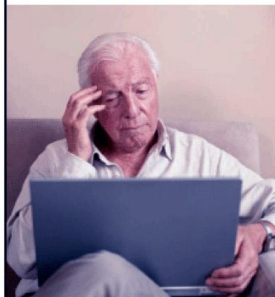
The New York City effort, complemented by seniors-only programs for the food service and

94%

of wired seniors send or receive e-mail compared to 91 percent of all Internet users.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF MILLER

GENERATIONAL DIVIDE



27%

of citizens 65 or older
use the Internet.

healthcare industries, is at the forefront of various state and local initiatives to bridge the generational digital divide. While many young adults have grown up with PCs, most seniors view computers and the Internet as an unknown and even fearsome world.

Risks and Challenges

The nation's generational digital divide represents an emerging issue for state and local governments. For one thing, governments risk leaving a significant portion of their communities behind as they migrate tax, licensing and voter information—and other critical services—online.

“Government agencies are doing a good job at moving public services online, and one of the great challenges will be to ensure that seniors will be able to access those services online instead of through the mail or by personal visits,” says Russell Bodoff, executive director of the Center for Aging Services Technologies in Washington, D.C. “Part of that challenge involves making Web sites

American Life Project survey reported that only 27 percent of those 65 or older use the Internet. While that represents an 80 percent jump from 2000, the numbers contrast sharply with the 64 percent of those aged 50 to 64 and 84 percent of those 18 to 29 years old who go online.

States Play Catch-Up

Unfortunately, state and local governments' efforts are often lagging behind the need. Some states do not have any government-sponsored digital initiatives for seniors. Even governments with successful programs, such as Seattle, Madison, Wisc., and Minnesota, often rely heavily on volunteers and struggle for funding.

Seattle has been working on bridging the digital divide since 2000, and now has computer classes at 11 sites, including senior centers, nonprofit organizations, and a combined Internet café and community center. More than 500 seniors are trained annually in everything from computer basics to digital photo editing. Fees start at \$15.

“In Wisconsin, the Madison Senior Center, a city agency, relies heavily on volunteers to teach about 350 seniors annually. Area computer literacy has advanced so much that “we have a hard time filling up our basic class,” says Christine Beatty, director of the center.”

more senior-friendly, with easy navigation and easier-to-read interfaces.”

In addition, seniors who lack digital skills find it increasingly difficult to find jobs and participate in their communities, increasing the chances that they will become burdens to governments and families. Finally, the first of the baby boom generation—who are generally more educated, activist and computer literate than their elders—will soon be retiring. Undoubtedly, they will want to access government services as easily as they order goods from Amazon.com or eBay.

Seattle surveyed Internet access and literacy among its residents in 2004 and reported that “of the dimensions of the digital divide examined ... the age divide seems the most consistent, pervasive and unchanging.” The survey also found that “the transition to electronic payment for government transactions will also be most challenging” for seniors and other groups such as those with less education or lower incomes.

The need to make seniors PC- and Internet-savvy is clear. While many people find it difficult to imagine a day without checking e-mail or a favorite Web site, a February-March 2005 Pew Internet &

One site is dedicated to helping mature job seekers learn computer basics and common office productivity tools.

According to Patti-lyn Bell, program coordinator for the Seniors Training Seniors in Computer Basics program in the Seattle Mayor's Office for Senior Citizens, the program has substantially evolved since its early days, mainly to accommodate the learning requirements of seniors.

Since it is estimated that seniors learn one-and-a-half to two times more slowly than the general population, the Seattle program takes care to pace the material to a senior's ability to absorb information. For example, a lot of class time is spent on learning how to manipulate the mouse and the art of the “double-click,” which some seniors have trouble mastering. The eight-hour introductory classes are usually limited to six attendees, and are taught by one of 31 volunteer instructors, who are older than 50, and an assistant.

In Wisconsin, the Madison Senior Center, a city agency, relies heavily on volunteers to teach about 350 seniors annually. Classes last eight to 12 weeks, and cover e-mail, the Internet, word processing and financial software, in addition to basic computer

skills. One class even covers how to buy a computer. Computer literacy has advanced so much that "we have a hard time filling up our basic class," says Christine Beatty, director of the center.

The Senior Center, which collaborates closely with the Madison Area Technical College for instruction and curriculum development, offers 12 computers for training in a city facility. The facility depends on the city's IT firewall and other infrastructure, which are vital for avoiding viruses and other digital infiltration. The city's IT staff helps troubleshoot problems.

In its program, Minnesota combines the strong senior demand for PC skills with a federal requirement to supply information about Medicare services. For six years, the Minnesota Board on Aging, with funding from the Federal Center for Medicare Services and the federal Administration on Aging, has been sponsoring "Senior Surf Days" statewide. About 1,900 individuals who are 60 or older come annually to two three-hour training sessions at local community centers and libraries.

At these events, seniors learn how to use search engines, sign up for free e-mail accounts, and go online to access Medicare and other information that's of interest. According to Krista Boston, a manager with the consumer choices team, Department of Human Services and the Minnesota Board on Aging, a Senior Surf Day is held almost every day in the state.

"Our niche is public information, not intensive training," Boston says. "If someone wants more training, we refer them to other organizations." She notes that it is sometimes a balancing act to provide both the information federal funding requires and the computer expertise many seniors desire.

Success Factors

New York City, Seattle, Madison and Minnesota report that three factors are critical for the success of any senior training program: an adequately staffed and maintained lab, quality volunteer instructors—ideally peers of the senior students—and an up-to-date infrastructure that can accommodate special senior requirements.

A lab provides additional practice and also gives seniors who don't have PCs an opportunity to do research or send and receive communications. However, unless labs have trained overseers to provide assistance, seniors can get frustrated if they run into an unexpected obstacle and can't get help. Such oversight also avoids unauthorized usage, which can result in inappropriate pop-ups or viruses.


Seattle's Bell personally interviews and trains each potential volunteer instructor to determine

potential teaching style. "It takes a certain type of individual to teach basic skills," she says. "A good attitude, humor and patience are key, not high-tech knowledge."

Because funding is always an issue, it is tempting to rely on donations. But Madison found out that donation is often a synonym for "unusable junk." Instead, Madison purchased older computers from city agencies for \$150 each. New York City has relied on software, service and other contributions from IBM and other companies.

Bodoff, of the Center for Aging Services Technologies, emphasizes that bridging the senior digital divide must be approached strategically, not tactically.

"A lot of discussions about the Internet and seniors revolve around making typefaces larger and navigation easier," Bodoff says. "Governments should be looking at ways to move health care and other services online to provide them more inexpensively and more effectively for seniors. Although it is not a priority now because of cutbacks everywhere, a storm is coming as the boomers retire. Everybody in government IT must start getting ready now."

After all, time is rapidly running out. The first of the baby boom generation is set to retire on January 1, 2006. 



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How Seniors Learn Best

SENIORS LEARN at a different pace: They can take about one-and-a-half to two times as long as younger people to acquire a new skill, says Neil Charness, a professor at Florida State University in Tallahassee, and incoming president of the Adult Development and Aging Division of the American Psychological Association in Washington, D.C. As a result, classroom pacing must match the ability of seniors to absorb new information. Here are some guidelines that can help:

- **Knowledge counts:** For seniors, the ability to learn depends on what has already been learned. Charness points out that seniors with computer experience can learn more in classes, more quickly. Seniors without any keyboarding skills will be handicapped in computer classes.
- **Consistency is key:** Training material, methodology and Web sites should be as consistent as possible to reduce potential confusion. Charness suggests testing Web sites and educational materials with panels that include seniors.
- **Internet education consists of more than computer classes:** Unsophisticated users are also prey to the successors of telemarketing schemes that have long victimized seniors, advises Russell Bodoff, executive director of the Center for Aging Services Technologies in Washington, D.C. Governments should also educate senior citizens about appropriate Internet usage. For example, it is all right to submit a Social Security number to a confirmed financial institution, but not to an online merchant.
- **Small classes are best:** The City of Seattle recommends a ratio of one trainer for every three students. Other tips are online at www.cityofseattle.net/tech/seniors/toc.htm.